On a recent transatlantic flight, I indulged in a marathon of several of the Marvel comics recently turned into big-screen movies: *Thor*, *The Avengers*, *Iron Man* (1, 2 and 3!). I was struck by how often an underlying element dealt with father-and-son relationships. This is surely one of the archetypal myths of our culture. It's not surprising, then, to find it in the stories of the Bible as well. Even our image of God is rooted in this primal relationship.

The expectations of parents and children are always complex, often misunderstood. Those who never find this recognition spend their entire lives searching for it, often in all the wrong places. Those who work too hard to achieve it can find themselves denying their own talents to be something they think their parents want them to be.

The story of Jesus's Baptism is told in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It's hinted at in the Gospel of John. This event marked the beginning of Jesus's public ministry, and in hindsight we can see it as the unequivocal sign from God that Jesus was the chosen one.

It's easy to forget that Jesus was human as well as divine, that his earthly father may have died while he was still a child, that the direction of his life is suddenly far from what anyone in his village could have predicted. Surely the mystical experience at his baptism must have been a great reassurance that he was on the right track. Joseph may have wanted Jesus to be a carpenter, but God the Father confirms his choice to accept the role designed for him from the beginning of time.

This is an affirmation of who Jesus is, both as an individual and in relationship to the Father. It also reminds us God loves us more for who we are—his children—than for what we do. This is something that often gets turned upside down in our own human relationships.

In Matthew's Gospel, we hear an exchange between John the Baptist and Jesus that the other evangelists don't include. John is reluctant to baptize the man he recognizes as clearly superior to himself. We can understand John's hesitation. He knows that his baptism is a cleansing of sin, and he recognizes that the man before him is no sinner. But Jesus was willing to be seen mingling with sinners, even here at the beginning of his ministry. This was the heart of his mission. Because he was so loved, he was able to reach out in love to everyone, saint and sinner alike.

Our first reading, chosen from one of Isaiah's Suffering Servant songs, talks about justice being established through gentleness, forbearance, tolerance and patience. These qualities all suggest something much deeper than mere surface approval. They reflect the sort of deep understanding that makes it possible for us to grow into well-rounded and compassionate human beings.

We all know people who define themselves and their importance by what they do. We may do this ourselves. We need to find ways to let those people know they are loved simply for themselves, simply because God created them. Because once we are rooted in this love, there's almost nothing we can't do, not because we seek blessing but because we are blessed.

Jesus came to show us the way to union with God the Father, the one who will always say to us, "You are my beloved child, with whom I am well-pleased." What more do we need?
One of the most familiar stories told about Francis is that of his dramatic renunciation of his merchant father, when Francis claimed only his Father in heaven. Yet we also know that Francis sought the approval of the pope for his rule. In the early biographies of St. Francis, as well as more recent ones, we discover an undercurrent of a human desire for approval from those he regarded as role models and authority figures.

It’s not too far of a stretch to see in Francis a lingering desire for his father’s approval, for a sign that he was making the right choices for himself and for those who were following him. There’s nothing wrong with this. It’s a big part of being human and living in society.

Francis, like many of the saints, was blessed with an unshakeable sense of God’s approval. But we know that he still sought counsel from his friends and followers, especially St. Clare and some of the early brothers.

Most of us don’t hear God’s voice speaking to us (and probably would be reluctant to admit it if we did!). We might need to rely on others to keep us on track. There’s comfort in knowing that we follow Jesus and the saints in this as in so much else.

Our Father,
you say to us as you said to Jesus,
“You are my beloved son;
you are my beloved daughter.
In you I am well pleased.”

May we always know in our hearts this deep love you have for us and live our lives so they reflect your face to the world.

Reading has always been a big part of my family’s life. For years, the only TV in the house was a venerable portable that flickered many evenings against a crowd of children with their noses buried in books.

When my oldest got an award at school for all his extracurricular reading, he presented it at the kitchen table with a, “Ta-da! How much do you love me now?”

The younger three all looked anxiously for my answer, doubtless thinking they’d have some catching-up to do. It took a lot of explaining to make it clear that love was not something awarded for good behavior or withheld for bad behavior. It was just always going to be there.

Though we recognize this in our own families, somehow we can still be surprised to discover God’s faithful love. Our loved ones can remind us that, whatever our failings, we are loved—deeply, unconditionally, eternally.

### WEEKDAY READINGS

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<tr>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>1 Sm 1:1-8/Mk 1:14-20</th>
<th>Friday</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Thursday</td>
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